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Darien Foundation Awards \$80K To Convert STAR Group Residence to a 'Smart Home'

Author : David Gurliacci

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While the six residents at the Darien Cottage are already living semi-independently and several of them hold jobs and volunteer locally, smart home assistive technology will soon allow them to be more self-reliant in their home.

— *an announcement from* [STAR Inc., Lighting the Way](#) *and* [The Darien Foundation](#)

Nestled on Edgerton Street, the STAR Cottage is home to six residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including wheelchair user, Ashley Milne. Now, when Ashley wishes to enter or exit the Cottage, she relies upon other people to open and close the doors for her.

Now, through a \$80,707 grant from The Darien Foundation, the STAR group residence will literally be able to open doors for Ashley.

When fellow resident Tom Gogolak turns in for the night, he and the residential staff perform a series of tasks to lock up the house, arm the security system, and shut down all of the devices. When Ashley, Tom and the other residents wish to use the kitchen, it is not easy for them to do so without assistance.

The technological advancements funded by this grant will also enable her, Tom and the other residents to live more independently, have more privacy, and be less reliant upon others.

What's Being Installed

The Cottage will soon be more secure, automated and integrated, allowing residents to live with greater independence and security. These solutions, set to be installed this spring, will include enhancements that will allow the residents to control lights and other electronics in their rooms via their personal devices.

They will also have greater privacy in their personal living spaces, as well as a bit more autonomy in the kitchen, owing to the special modifications.

Similarly, at night when Gogolak assists the staff with shutting down the Cottage, he will soon be able to perform this ritual more efficiently with two to three simple button presses on his device, and also to simply say “turn off family room lights” to power down the integrated lighting system.

The Cottage’s two main entrances will also be equipped with an automatic door function that can be operated by Milne (from a control panel on her wheelchair) so that she can enter and exit, without asking someone to open or close the doors for her. Finally, an enhanced security system, including exterior video surveillance cameras, will be installed.

“I think the new features will give the residents greater independence while assisting me and the staff in our duties to keep everyone safe, healthy and connected,” said Latasha Smith, STAR residential manager. “It will be a win for everyone!”

Beyond the enhancements, one of the most important aspects to the project is ease of operation. This technology, developed for consumer homes, is designed to be intuitive, user-friendly, and easy to operate.

The staff and the residents will be able to operate all of the controls seamlessly from their devices, and a control room will be added so that the staff can manage the technology from a central location.

Finally, every system will have an override function, in case there is an issue, and/or someone needs to make a manual adjustment.

Model for Other Homes

In addition to improving the quality of life of the residents, the Darien Cottage will serve as a model — open for other individuals with IDD and their families to visit and see the many possibilities available.

The Cottage is one of over a dozen residences that STAR, Inc., Lighting the Way operates and oversees for adults with IDDs in the area. The end goal is to augment those residences with Smart Home technology, as well.

“Not only will this benefit the residents of the Darien Cottage, but the reach of this project will extend past Edgerton Street as a resource and model for other Darien families and adults with IDD,” said The Darien Foundation Chairman of the Board, Ward Glassmeyer.

Katie Banzhaf, Executive Director at STAR, said: “Assistive technology for people with disabilities is literally opening up doors and opportunities that were never thought possible.

“Clearly, this pandemic has magnified the needs and benefits of technology to keep us all safe, connected, and healthy. This grant will showcase some of the newest technology available to improve lives. We are excited and grateful to The Darien Foundation for investing in this program and sharing our future vision.”

Foundation Expands Initial Project

As part of the grant review process, Sean Calvillo, The Darien Foundation Technology Board chair, along with his committee, including Board members Nicole Harder and Brett Wein, acted as strategic partners and consulted on the project.

The committee ultimately recommended that the initial proposal be expanded upon to ensure that the improvements would have longevity and that they would thoroughly address all of the residents’ needs.

“We wanted to ensure that the solutions we identified would be scalable, not become obsolete too soon,” Calvillo said, “and most importantly, that the technology would be easy to use by the residents and managers.”

Specialists Called In

Next, STAR turned to Kevin Vallerie, independent contractor, technology advisor and owner of [Untangled, LLC](#), a local firm that specializes in smart home technology.

“This experience is inspirational to me and my crew as we are learning to walk in the shoes of someone with a disability to determine how to adapt existing technology to address personal needs for safety, inclusion, connection, accessibility and communication,” Vallerie said.

STAR also enlisted assistive technology specialist, Enrico Melchiorri to collaborate and advise on the project. Melchiorri has worked in assistive technology for 25 years, with STAR for two years, and is very

knowledgeable about the different needs and challenges faced by adults with IDD.

“Although this will be our first project together, Enrico and I have spent some time reviewing options with regard to cost, reliability and durability, as well as ensuring the best possible future-proofing for the project,” Vallerie said. “Our plan is to allow for the house to evolve technologically with the needs of the residents.”

Melchiorri, who provided vital input to the project, added: “These improvements are extensive, but were also carefully researched to identify the simplest and most budget conscious solutions.”

Vallerie said his business benefits from the project, too: “We anticipate that the knowledge that we gain from installing this Smart Home showcase for people with disabilities will allow us to better serve other local families with similar challenges — and that’s a great feeling.”

Smith, the residential manager, said she's grateful for ongoing training and support for the staff and residents is part of the project.

“Having Kevin and Enrico instruct us as to how to use everything, and to have them on hand for technical support, will be very helpful.”

Helping the Mission of the Cottage

Kathy and Peter Gogolak, two of the founding parents of the Cottage, said the improvements should help the lives of their son and his housemates:

“Our dream of a cottage in Darien for people with disabilities, including our son Tom, has been a reality for over 10 years now. How fitting it is to celebrate this milestone by bringing in new technology to further enhance the lives of the residents.

“As parents, the added safety features, monitoring, and connections bring even greater peace of mind knowing that our son, and his staff, have beneficial new tools.”

About STAR, Inc.

[STAR, Inc., Lighting the Way](#) is a not-for-profit organization established in 1952 to serve individuals of all ages who are impacted by intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in Fairfield County, as well as providing support services to their families.

STAR creates opportunities for individuals to live full lives with independence, freedom of choice and personal growth by providing support, services and advocacy. STAR informs and encourages the community to recognize and appreciate the value of all individuals.

STAR is the only affiliated chapter of The Arc in Fairfield County. The Arc is an advocacy and informational

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agency benefitting people with intellectual disabilities on state and national levels.

About The Darien Foundation

[The Darien Foundation](#) is an independent, community-based, 501(c) (3) public charity. Since 1998, The Darien Foundation has awarded over \$4.7 million in grants for technology and capital initiatives, which create opportunity for Darien’s youth, support our town’s safety and security services, and enhance the overall quality of life in Darien.

Our volunteer Board of Directors—who reflect the many constituencies of Darien—thoroughly evaluates grant requests and assists grant recipients in achieving their goals.

Public donations are directed to supporting grants awarded by The Darien Foundation, as all operating costs have been funded by Board member and Officer contributions.

Most recently, The Darien Foundation has awarded grants to Corbin Cares, the Darien Arts Center, DAF Media, the Darien Police Department, The Depot Youth Center, Person-to-Person, and TV79.

For more information about The Darien Foundation:

—Website: DarienFoundation.org.

—Facebook: @darienfoundation

—Instagram: @thedarienfoundation

—Twitter: @DarienFDN

—YouTube: bit.ly/DFoundationYouTube

—LinkedIn: @the-darien-foundation